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‘(Beyond) “Devoirs de mémoire” in Nancy Huston’s *L’Empreinte de l’ange* (1998): Music, Trauma and Childhood’

Abstract

Nancy Huston’s *L’Empreinte de l’ange* (1998) is part of a large corpus of recently published novels in French dealing with World War II, and the Algerian War. The relationship between music and transgenerational trauma is explored in the context of depictions of childhood, and the child in the text, and it is suggested that *L’Empreinte de l’ange* opens up readings that go beyond the French ‘devoir de mémoire’ framework. More specifically it is argued that the oscillations between words and silence, trauma (physical and emotional) and healing, movement and stasis, highlight the challenges of writing about personal and collective moments of suffering. Analysis of depictions of cycles of violence and trauma opens up a nuanced picture of diverse post-war reactions and commentaries that go beyond the specifics of the Second World War and Algeria, and that take into account recent work by Todorov, Augé and Stora on memory and commemoration. Music is shown to help make sense of traumatic memories; music highlights processes of remembering and forgetting. Sometimes, music just simply accompanies us through the often fraught journeys out of and after trauma.

Keywords: Nancy Huston; music, transgenerational trauma, childhood, WWII, Algerian War, cycles of return

Résumé

L’Empreinte de l’ange (1998) de Nancy Huston fait partie d’un large corpus de romans récemment publiés en français qui ont pour thème la Seconde guerre mondiale et la guerre d’Algérie. Les rapports entre musique et traumatisme transgénérationnel sont explorés dans le contexte de représentations de l’enfance et de l’enfant dans le texte. On propose ici une lecture de *L’Empreinte de l’ange* comme allant au-delà de la notion française de ‘devoir de mémoire’. Plus précisément, le va-et-vient entre les mots et le silence, le traumatisme

(physique et émotionnel) et la guérison, le mouvement et l'immobilisme, met en lumière les difficultés propres à l'écriture d'épisodes de souffrance personnelle et collective. L'analyse des représentations de cycles de violence et de traumatisme révèle un paysage plus nuancé de réactions et de commentaires dans l'après-guerre. C'est une analyse qui va au-delà du contexte de la Seconde guerre mondiale et de la guerre d'Algérie pour prendre en compte les écrits de Todorov, Augé et Stora sur la mémoire et la commémoration. La musique permet une meilleure compréhension de souvenirs traumatiques; la musique souligne les processus de la mémoire et de l'oubli. Parfois la musique nous accompagne tout simplement au cours de la traversée - souvent très difficile - et de la sortie du traumatisme.

‘(Beyond) “Devoirs de mémoire” in Nancy Huston’s *L’Empreinte de l’ange* (1998): Music, Trauma and Childhood’

The title of Nancy Huston’s 1998 novel, *L’Empreinte de l’ange*, suggests a somewhat ethereal dimension to the subject matter, ostensibly rather removed from the actual context for the novel which concerns the Second World War, and the Algerian war. This apparent disjuncture of title and subject matter is the starting point for my investigation of some of the dialectical relationships in the novel, between words and silence, trauma and healing, movement and stasis. Recipient of the ‘Prix Elle des lectrices’ in 1999,¹ the novel explores the responsibilities of remembering, recording, and repenting, via the presentation of various characters’ life histories, and especially the figure of the child in the text. The themes of reparation and physical and emotional healing (their possibilities and also their limitations) feature heavily. There is also a conspicuous musical strand that runs through the narrative, beginning with the two epigraphs to the novel. What are we to make of the connections between angels, music, trauma and history? This article proposes to examine Huston’s engagement with the notion of ‘devoir de mémoire’, and to situate her explorations beyond the specifics of that particular framework in order to tease out the relationship between trauma and music in the text.

Stories about war, childhood, relationships, and the experience of exile abound in Huston’s œuvre.² Exile and displacement in particular reflect the impact of Huston’s own ‘outsider’ status on her understanding of her engagement with her adopted France and native Canada. Huston is writing from a perspective that is non-metropolitan French (Jones 2009); and, as Averis comments, her writing project is ‘entirely tied up with her displacement’.³ Huston’s writings can thus be viewed in the light of her own liminal positioning and interest in the experience of being uprooted; her characters frequently occupy an in-between space, as is the case for the character Saffie in *L’Empreinte de l’ange*.⁴ In Huston’s ‘poétique du témoignage’ (a term used by Dominique Viart in his examination of literary testimony (Viart 2008, 175)), music, story, memories and trauma intertwine. Huston negotiates aesthetics and

ethics in her creation of a compelling story which bears witness to an exploration of and engagement with France's 'memory wars'. In so doing, she explores how younger generations suffer under the weight of their foremothers' and fathers' histories. The challenges of processing traumatic experiences emerge, especially as regards what can or cannot be said, accessed, or understood.

In modern and contemporary writing in French which deals with the period of the Second World War, and its legacy, there are many depictions to be found of such cycles of trauma, from Georges Perec's *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* (1975) to more recent publications such as Lydie Salvayre's *La Compagnie des spectres* (1997), Sylvie Germain's *Magnus* (2005) and Philippe Grimbert's *Un Secret* (2007). In these texts the child plays a pivotal role as a survivor of transgenerational trauma. This is understood to be a trauma that passes down the generations, often used in the context of Holocaust survivors (see Hirsch 2008; Schwab 2010). Schwab writes that '[i]t is through the unconscious transmission of disavowed familial dynamics that one generation affects another generation's unconscious' (Schwab 2010, 4). This ongoing proliferation of texts in French about transgenerational trauma, especially in the context of the Second World War, is striking. As Valérie Haas observes, Henry Rousso's 'syndrome de Vichy' is alive and well:

Depuis quelques années donc, nous avons vu émerger dans la vie sociale une préoccupation de plus en plus grande pour la question de la mémoire. Fer de lance de cette tyrannie: la période de Vichy occupe une place démesurée et prend des allures de syndrome. Vichy est partout, perpétuellement rappelé à notre souvenir. (Haas 2002, 59).

In studies of *L'Empreinte de l'ange* critics have engaged specifically with this traumatic legacy, for example, in terms of the depiction and function of memories of the Paris demonstration of 17 October 1961 (Jones 2009), and in the relationships between personal and national identity, via the cycles of violence and what Margaret-Anne Hutton argues is Hutton's 'future-oriented, ethical, concept of memory' (Hutton 2007, 172). In her article Hutton also highlights the warnings about the dangers of forgetting the past. Considerable attention has (justifiably) been paid to the ways in which the Second World War and the

Algerian war of independence are examined and juxtaposed, as well as to the potential pitfalls of doing so (Jones 2009).⁵ Such explorations of the Second World War highlight warnings by the likes of critics such as Marc Augé (1998), Tzvetan Todorov (1998), and Benjamin Stora (2011), to name but a few, who urge us to avoid the risk of compartmentalisation by focusing on the past in such a way that it renders us blind to the concerns of the present.⁶

The narrative perspective in *L'Empreinte de l'ange* favours readings sympathetic to a 'devoir de mémoire', this very public commitment on the part of the state to record, and to assume a certain responsibility for past political regimes in which the victims' suffering is acknowledged often many years after the traumatic events.. The narrator commentator presents a largely didactic, and sometimes ironic, critique of official French structures and stances. This commentator highlights the importance of recording and remembering for posterity (see, for example, *EA* 104, 170, 194, 196, 217). This critical voice punctuates the narrative at frequent intervals. The interventions include historical updates and salvos piercing through the structures of the love story. French blindspots and amnesia about the relationship with Algeria are documented explicitly in the text (as Jones's and Hutton's articles highlight). In addition to the juxtapositioning of the two wars, various other strands of the story open up the question of the extent to which it is possible to overcome great suffering or to avoid perpetuating heinous crimes, or indeed to assume the burden of the crimes, or trauma, of self, or of others.⁷ Huston's text is firmly anchored in a recognisably plausible 'real' world, with explicit foregrounding of social and cultural questions and controversies.⁸ In this case the focus is on French institutional responses to its history, notably the traumatic legacies of the Second World War and the Algerian war.

Beyond the notion of 'devoir de mémoire', and the call to bear witness against collective amnesia, there are related narrative strands that present complementary ways of reading and interpreting the stories within a broader frame, via the personal narratives of trauma, healing and reparation.⁹ These narratives document failure, tragic outcomes, and vicious cycles, even eternal cycles of return. Articulating experiences of loss and trauma that seem to be beyond any 'rational' grasp, a seemingly impossible task, is one that nevertheless

enacts repeated returns. As Žižek puts it: ‘The essence of the trauma is precisely that it is too horrible to be remembered, to be integrated into our symbolic universe. All we have to do is to mark repeatedly the trauma as such’ (Žižek 1991, 272-73).¹⁰ Ursula Tidd, in her study of concentration camp survivor Jorge Semprun, writes about trauma in the light of Ulrich Baer’s reference to ‘unresolved experience’, inherently unstable, and as ‘elusive and highly resistant to memorial inscription and integration and hence representation’ (Tidd 2008, 701). Grasping the very nature of trauma is a challenge. Music plays a vital role in explorations and depictions of experiences of trauma in *L’Empreinte de l’ange*, often when words fail. Music accompanies our most intimate and most extreme experiences, as rituals of all kinds testify, from births and weddings to funerals, triumphs to disasters.¹¹ This vital function of music can be traced in Huston’s text.

At the heart of *L’Empreinte de l’ange* is the child, Emil. He plays a pivotal role, in real, structural and symbolic terms, alongside the musical leitmotif. Michael Rothberg’s study of ‘multidirectional’ memory foregrounds the important role played by the child figure across a range of texts including *L’Empreinte de l’ange*. For him, ‘the figure of the child has taken center stage as a site of uneasy, multidirectional memory’, and is ‘a bearer of memory and postmemory in a moment of violent global transformation’ (Rothberg 2009, 27). In *L’Empreinte de l’ange* Emil is presented as a witness, and a hostage, positioned liminally between different cultures. As a site and bearer of memory, he suffers from the repercussions of his family’s traumatic history. His mother, Saffie, carries the scars of her experiences from the Second world war (she and her mother were both raped by Soviet soldiers, and her mother subsequently committed suicide; her father, we learn, was a Nazi sympathiser who worked for a pharmaceutical company, was implicated in Auschwitz deaths, and brought before a tribunal after the war (EA 140, 167, 180).

Emil is witness to the love affair between his mother and András, a Jewish-Hungarian instrument maker, and witness to the world generally. He is also a hostage to this relationship, and caught in-between two father figures and two cultures. Both Emil and András are also healers: they facilitate Saffie’s re-entry into the ‘real’ world from her traumatised, somewhat

frozen, stance. The physical body becomes the site of cathartic transformation. If we view the text less in terms of ‘devoir de mémoire’ and more in terms of the romance plot, *L’Empreinte de l’ange* privileges the story of the love affair between András and Saffie, and the way in which their relationship enables them to work through and overcome their past traumas. András and Saffie confide in each other about their experiences, whilst in the background the Algerian war rages. Their meeting unleashes a cathartic, physical and psychological purging of trauma (‘purgé, catharsisé si l’on ose dire par la violence érotique, *EA* 184): ‘Saffie se sent délestée de son enfance comme par dix ans de psychanalyse’, *EA* 184). Thanks to András, the young woman described at the outset as a kind of frozen automaton, for Raphaël a Bellmer doll willing to be passively manipulated (*EA* 36), gradually opens up to the world again, and to her child. If there is sexual ‘healing’ through András, there is also maternal healing. It is Emil who enables Saffie to re-engage with the world around her. She remains grounded in the present thanks to her son: ‘Dieu merci, il y a Emil. Il la ramène *au réel*. Son fils. Elle le regarde, pleine de reconnaissance’ (*EA* 190) (my emphasis); ‘Pour Emil il faut rester ici, en France, en octobre 1961, et ne pas perdre pied’ (*EA* 190). His need for care keeps Saffie connected to the everyday tasks associated with mothering, with the effect that she does not lose her grasp on *embodied* reality. He, like many second-generation survivors, fulfils a life-saving function, but he also carries the heavy burden of that responsibility, in line with Hirsch’s interpretation of ‘postmemory’, since Saffie transmits her traumatic experience to the next generation (Hirsch, 2008).

Sometimes the circumstances in which Emil calls his mother back to a present reality are less traumatic than prosaic (the descriptions of his excretory bodily functions, for example). However, the examples given are not trivial: they underline the concrete realities of being alive, as opposed to being cut off from sensory experiences. These ‘frozen’ moments are associated with Saffie at various points in the narrative, and it is Emil who draws her out of her paralysed state and isolation:

Ils se sont presque perdus en ce moment, chacun noyé dans le sang de ses souvenirs, drainé de tout espoir et de tout désir, échoué dans l'immuable solitude du malheur. Heureusement qu'il est là, Emil. Il est en train de faire caca: tout son visage est distendu et empourpré par l'effort (EA 143).

In this focus on the body, and in particular, bodily discomfort, the narrator invites the reader to consider their own experience of embodiment and vulnerability:

Le problème d'Emil en ce moment, c'est une couche mouillée, l'acide urique qui lui ronge la peau des fesses et de l'entrejambe. Ne ricaniez pas: vous en avez été là, vous aussi. Et il se peut bien qu'un jour vous le soyez encore (EA 89).

We are reminded that Emil is flesh and blood; he is not an angel, yet he carries his mother's desire to flee her identity and embodiment into a state of unreality. Emil provides the link to a new identity, one that seeks to erase all German connections: 'Quand Emil se mettra à parler, il l'appellera non pas Mutti mais maman. C'est terminé Mutter, et la Muttersprache avec: suspendues, une fois pour toutes...' (EA 74).¹²

Via Emil (and András), Saffie gains access to the child within herself, and to the childhood she never had, in which carefree play is possible: 'Ce n'est pas qu'elle retrouve son enfance, non: *c'est* son enfance, sa première découverte de l'insouciance et du jeu' (EA 166).¹³ Saffie and Emil engage in a reversal of roles, and it is the child, typically a symbol of vulnerability and innocence in novels, who contributes here towards his mother's healing. As representative of the next generation, he inherits its woes; he is frequently the witness, and ultimately the victim. He dies at the end, and there is no possibility for reparation.¹⁴ He is positioned in an in-between, referred to as 'leur otage' (EA 176), held hostage in order for Saffie and András to forge and maintain their relationship. Unlike other children he does not go to school, so that Saffie can continue to deceive Raphaël. His inner world is one of confusion, and he does not have a firm grasp of reality nor any concrete sense of self. At no point are his best interests considered, as this quotation reveals:

C'est Emil qui a le plus changé au cours de ces deux années. Il a toujours le même corps frêle et le même regard noir aux reflets verts. Mais il a maintenant, de plus, un air inquiet. Et pour cause: cet enfant est en porte-à-faux avec la réalité. Comme sa mère, il vit une double vie – mais, là où les deux vies de Saffie s'ajoutent l'une à l'autre, celles d'Emil s'annulent. Il n'a rien, n'est rien. Personne ne s'est soucié de savoir qui il était, ce qui serait bon pour lui (*EA* 198).

Shaped by the far-reaching actions of those around him, Emil suffers for them. His identity is uncertain and shifting (if his mother was once described as 'un fantôme' (*EA* 21) he is now 'nothing', and has nothing, as if she had passed on this shadowy absence of presence. If he is representative of a new generation, or of the innocent and the vulnerable, any hope for a new start is extinguished.¹⁵ In this way, the message coming from the novel about the transmission of trauma is rather bleak: the cycles may continue *ad infinitum*. The novel closes at the point where it starts, in the Gare du Nord, where Saffie took her first steps in Paris, and the fleeting, inconclusive encounter many years later between Raphaël and András, the two men left behind. A cycle of endless return is embedded in the plot structure itself. In the light of these cycles, and this tragic ending, Raphaël, the musician whose name is associated in Hebrew with healing, as well as angels,¹⁶ seems far from living up to any kind of 'healing' function in the text.¹⁷ This function has thus far been associated with Emil and András.

If we side-step into the musical intertext, the links between music and transgenerational trauma can be explored in more depth. Music is everywhere in the narrative: there are many references to composers, to pieces of music and songs, to singing and playing music. What is more, words associated with music are frequently used: harmony, sound, voice etc. Music provides an accompaniment to major life events (in this text music is referenced for creating life, for ending life, for sustaining life), and it also provides a socio-historical context for the story. For example, we read about Paris in the 1950s and 60s in terms of what was playing on the radio, and what Raphaël was performing in his concert tours, his classical European repertoire contrasting with the jazz strains that emerge from

András's radio in the workshop, and the impromptu accordionists on the *Pont des arts*.¹⁸

Raphaël believes that in dire circumstances, music fulfils an important function:

[..] la musique, c'est ma lutte à moi. Jouer de la flûte, c'est ma façon à moi de rendre le monde meilleur. C'est ce que je peux faire. il y aura toujours des injustices, des révoltes et des guerres, des gens qui sont obligés de sacrifier leur bonheur présent pour que leurs enfants puissent espérer un avenir meilleur. Mais il faut aussi que le bonheur et la beauté soient *incarnés quelque part*, ici et maintenant. C'est un acte politique aussi, ça, de les offrir au monde. C'est même un devoir politique pour celui qui, comme moi, a été gâté par le destin, à qui la vie a tout donné: argent, santé, talent... (EA 192).

The irony here is that when the musician pronounces this view to Saffie, she is not listening; she is preoccupied by what might have happened to András during the demonstration. His words fall on deaf ears. In David Powell's analysis of music in the text, he posits that it serves to highlight Raphaël's detached stance, his 'cocon stagnant' in which he is ignorant of the world around him, his musical tastes symbolising bourgeois convention (Powell 2001, 59).¹⁹ However naïve and solipsistic he may seem, Raphaël is guiltily aware of his privileged position, and provides a key to the musical connections in the story, which combine the concrete ('incarné') and the metaphysical. He believes that music can play a role, maybe even a political role.²⁰ Perhaps it is in this respect that he earns his name as potential 'healer', however circumscribed that role might appear.

We find out how music for Saffie has become imbricated in her painful memories, to the extent that the songs from her childhood maintain their frightening and sinister connotations (singing soothing songs for the animals which her vet father is asked to put to sleep; hearing songs that are supposed to calm when bombs rain down in the background). We learn why she has been incapable for a long time of singing to her child (EA 125, 134), because of the associations of singing with death (EA 141).²¹ The fact that Emil is described as having no musical compass – 'Emil connaît un peu toutes les musiques, mais aucune ne lui

appartient en propre' (*EA* 199) – reinforces the idea that he does not really know what defines or belongs to him.

Music accompanies the story, and is its structuring apparatus; its repetitive refrains could be understood as a means to articulate the extremes of emotion which are not voiced, or which go beyond words, and beyond the urgent didacticism of the critique of France's image of itself and its past. This non-linguistic mode of expression provides a rich and suggestive framework in which to situate the various characters, their perspectives and their responses to suffering. Anne Whitehead's study of trauma, which includes a chapter on its manifestation as repetition, resonates here, given certain repetitive refrains in the novel. Music opens up a broader questioning throughout the story of the nature of fate, and how we deal with the hand we are dealt. Let us consider the two epigraphs which open the novel, and which both engage with suffering and music, or to sound at least. The first is from Swedish author Göran Tunström (1937-2000):

'Comment comparer les souffrances?

La souffrance de chacun est la plus grande.

Mais qu'est-ce qui nous permet de continuer?

C'est le son, qui va et qui vient

comme l'eau parmi les pierres'.

The second, shorter reference is from Austrian author Ingeborg Bachmann (1926-1973):

'Allez, ne pleure pas, comme dit la musique'.

In the first quotation, there is a recognition that, in the face of universal suffering (and each person's suffering is significant in some way), the existence of sound, 'le son' (such as

music?) enables us to carry on. The image of water flowing intermittently suggests its enduring and potentially soothing qualities. In the second quotation, the meaning is ambiguous: in the face of the human rights abuses depicted in the story, and which keep being perpetuated, does the narrator invite stoicism or cynicism ('Allez, ne pleure pas')? The phrase is repeated at the end of chapter 15 (*EA* 195), following the revelations about Saffie's father's crimes, and Rachid's death and burial in a common grave. This intertextual reference opens up various music-related strands to ethical and political consideration. The exhortation not to cry comes from Bachmann's poem 'Engima', written in 1966-67 and dedicated to the German composer Hans Werner Henze, who had 'sought to synthesise the revolutionary in music and words' in 'la musique appliquée' (Couffon 1996, 110).²² Bachmann herself was well-known for stressing the importance of bringing literature and music together to avoid compartmentalisation of artforms, for example in her essay 'Musik und Dichtung'.²³ Couffon argues that for Bachmann music implied a political commitment: 'La musique lui permettrait de participer à une langue universelle et abandonnerait, en retour, son ascèse pour endosser une responsabilité, par exemple politique, et s'intéresser à la destinée humaine' (Couffon 1996, 110). Rétif also writes of Bachmann's own intertwining of aesthetics with ethics in her oeuvre: 'Bachmann est en quête d'une écriture qui serve la vie, qui cesse de se complaire dans la description de l'inéluctable, c'est-à-dire dans la mort, et de figer la vie dans le récit' (1996, 141). This approach is echoed in Huston's novel via the portraits of musicians Raphaël and András, as well as through the many intertextual musical references. The line in Bachmann's poem which follows 'Il ne faut pas pleurer, dit une musique', is 'Personne sinon ne dit plus rien'. This indicates a rather darker signification when read in conjunction with the preceding line. There is a sense that the consequences would be devastating. Music functions as conduit and as survival mechanism; it carries a potentially healing function but it can also resist or frustrate that possibility.

Bachmann's 'Enigma' poem also provides a point of contact with Mahler's Symphony number 3, in the injunction not to cry.²⁴ It was Nietzsche who offered a potentially

redeeming model for Mahler against any vision of pessimistic fatalism (Franklin 1991, 17). The symphony is an attempt to express the whole universe, moving from ‘Summer marches in’, ‘What the flowers in the meadow tell me’, ‘What the animals in the forest tell me’, and ‘What man tells me’, to ‘What the angels tell me’, and finally ‘What love tells me’ (Franklin 1991, 24-25). The Mahler symphony, and Nietzschean connections, put under the spotlight the question of responsibility in the face of the compulsion to repeat (Franklin 1991, 17-18). These intertextual references reinforce the ethical and philosophical dimensions of the text by inviting us to consider the repetition compulsion in both historical and personal terms.

Particular songs function intertextually to convey the idea that life goes on, and that we have limited control over the events that befall us. On the radio, Doris Day sings ‘Qué sera sera’: ‘The future’s not ours to see, qué sera, sera, what will be will be’; ‘When I was just a little girl, I asked my mother, what lies ahead?’ (*EA* 133). The song is intertwined with András’s questioning of why Saffie does not sing to her child; Saffie responds defensively as if accused of a crime – she does not know French songs, she sings out of key. She flees his questioning temporarily, only to return to unburden shameful feelings about singing: the lullabies she would sing as a child whilst her father injected the animals with cyanide (*EA* 141). Singing is associated with death here, and functions metonymically to signify a broader sense of shame regarding her father’s crimes, or even concerning genocide on a larger scale. The exploration of what songs mean to the different characters provides a means to open up their past histories.

In the exploration of these past histories, the message is that we have little control over our lives, that we are faced with random, unpredictable events (‘The future’s not ours to see’).²⁵ We act without the benefit of hindsight. Music accompanies the life stories, as a means to explore the nature of existence. Music can also serve as socio-historical barometer, and as ahistorical reference point for what remains beyond language. Music shapes the trauma narratives, often in cyclical, repetitive movements. This is in keeping with the musical leitmotif, and also highlights how transgenerational trauma affects subsequent generations.

We read about the legacies of mistakes and misdemeanours, fear, sorrow and pain, which are passed on, for example, from Saffie's father to Saffie herself and then to her child:

Aveugles et muets nous sommes, les yeux bandés par nos propres mains, la gorge obstruée par nos cris. Nous ne savons guérir notre douleur, seulement la transmettre, la donner en héritage. [...] un pied dans nos petites histoires et l'autre dans l'Histoire du siècle (EA 196).

The voice of the narrator highlights the random connections and haphazard collision of events in both collective and private spheres. Life is presented as a cyclical affair, one in which random events trigger other events, a cycle perpetuating itself indefinitely, reminiscent of the butterfly effect associated with chaos theory (although the narrator stresses here the absence of chaos). Most obviously the parallels between World War II and Algeria suggest that those in authority have short memories. But also in the context of the romance tragedy, the story ends where it begins, at the Gare du Nord, without closure or any sense of reconciliation. The narrator comments on the existence of parallel universes on earth, overlapping and shaping each other:

Comment tant de mondes peuvent-ils coexister sur une seule planète? Lequel parmi eux est le plus précieux, le plus vrai, le plus urgent à connaître? Ils s'agencent entre eux de façon complexe mais non pas chaotique, avançant de front, tourbillonnant, entrant en collision et en collusion les uns avec les autres, des effets surgissant des causes et se transformant à leur tour en causes qui déclencheront des effets et ainsi de suite et ainsi de suite, *à l'infini...* (EA 162) (my emphasis).

Within this vision of unpredictability, the narrator presents us with characters who are buffeted by fate and spun by the wheel of fortune. The image of the wheel is given material weight in the story, when Raphaël by chance notices Saffie and Emil on the big wheel in Jardin des Tuileries, with András beneath. This symbolic representation of the wheel of fortune highlights Raphaël's particular misfortune.²⁶ The random nature of human existence is

also underlined: ‘Comme tous, nous allons disparaître à la fin’ (EA 215): we will all die one day, we are reminded at the end of the last chapter. To survive you need to know how to play the game (as a ‘bon joueur’), and to understand what the game means. The narrator offers as a further example the misfortune that befell Saffie’s friend Lotte:

C’est son tour aujourd’hui et pas le nôtre, le toit de sa maison s’est effondré et sa fille Lotte, sept ans et demi – meilleure amie de Saffie, [...] Ne vous énervez pas, c’est ça le nom du jeu, c’est ça la vie, si je tombe sur la même case que toi tant pis, tu dois retourner à l’étable et attendre d’avoir lancé un six avant de pouvoir ressortir [...] il vaut mieux s’habituer dès maintenant, tu peux pousser un gros soupir mais ensuite il vaut mieux hausser les épaules et essayer de rigoler parce que c’est ça le jeu, hein? (EA 80).

The narrator’s angry cynicism combines with a heavy sense of fatalism. Emil’s death is also shocking, unexpected, and reinforces this strand of the story in which we are passive recipients of our fate, or, if we charge Raphaël with the death, that the cycles of violence are endlessly perpetuated. The narrative of eternal return, the notion that all things in existence recur for all eternity, that we are doomed to repeat, that progress is somewhat illusory, this metaphor of history as a circular phenomenon seems to be the underlining narrative thread. Here, we follow in the footsteps of Nietzsche in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Joyce, in *Finnegan’s Wake*, Marquez, in *One Hundred years of Solitude*, amongst others. In the epilogue, which jumps thirty-five years forwards, we learn that Algeria continues to be a bloodbath, that ‘Paris is Paris’, ever-increasingly a city of luxury, and that essentially, ‘plus ça change...’

Quant à l’Algérie, trente ans de dégénérescence socialiste ont reveillé chez nombre de ses citoyens de vieux fantasmes de rigueur religieuse: elle se déchire dans une guerre civile interminable et sanglante. Paris est Paris, plus insolent que jamais dans sa beauté et ses goûts de luxe (EA 217).

There is never-ending war, unemployment, and an ever-present gulf between rich and poor. The closing lines of the epilogue direct the reader to a rather stark, bitter warning: ‘Et c’est la fin? Oh! non. Je vous assure que non. Il suffit d’ouvrir les yeux: *partout, autour de vous, cela continue*’ (EA 220) (my emphasis).²⁷ The warning chimes with critiques by Todorov and Stora guarding against the dangers of focusing exclusively on the past to the detriment of becoming blind to events in the present.

The reader is invited nonetheless to be vigilant, perhaps even hopeful, rather than resigned. In addition to Raphaël’s belief that music *can* play a role, music is shown to go beyond language and national boundaries, and can function as a conduit for the expression of visceral responses, of all kinds. It will not save lives, but it might make living and dying more bearable. Do we need the ‘mark of the angel’ to forget? András suggests to Saffie that all children are born with their memories of a previous paradise erased, that amnesia is necessary, in order to come into the world innocent; otherwise no-one would want to be born (‘Qui accepte d’entrer dans cette merde? Ha! Personne! On a besoin de l’ange!’).²⁸ The motif of the angel serves as reminder of the power of repression. Music offers the means to explore these obscured zones; it can sometimes bypass the instinct to repress. The musical references tell us more about the characters than we would otherwise glean from their portraits, and the moments of silence can be powerful, whether willed, or as result of an inability to speak. Via the ‘multidirectional’ strands of memory, music, and trauma, Huston’s text goes beyond any narrowly defined ‘devoir de mémoire’ to articulate a nuanced picture of diverse post-war reactions and commentaries that go beyond the specifics of the Second World War and Algeria. The reader is witness to the transmission of trauma. Memory, like the cycles of eternal return, is constantly updating and repeating itself, as Pierre Nora reminds us (‘La mémoire est un phénomène toujours actuel, un lien vécu au présent éternel’ (Nora 1984, vol. 1, xix). Huston’s text makes that process explicit: the processing of trauma specifically requires that we re-experience the traumatic events, each time processing the emotions in the light of the present. Freud’s view was that when we recall a traumatic event, there will be slight changes in the way the experience is remembered and re-lived (Freud 1914). Music is

shown to affect the processes of remembering and forgetting. *L'Empreinte de l'ange* brings into focus the complex task of processing personal and collective memories of violence and trauma. The child, Emil, witness and ultimately victim, serves as reminder of what is lost and cannot be regained, a symbol of loss of hope in the face of violence, misfortune and misunderstanding. Younger generations suffer under the weight of their foremothers' and fathers' histories. On this sombre and sobering journey, Huston demonstrates how music can and does accompany us through the fraught passage into, out of and after trauma.²⁹

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¹ *L'Empreinte de l'ange* (Paris: Actes Sud, 1998). Page references are to the J'ai lu edition (1998), hereafter abbreviated to *EA* in the text.

² See, for example, *Lignes de faille* (2006) and *Infrared* (2012).

³ Kate Averis, 'Nancy Huston: Biography', Centre for the Study of Contemporary Women's Writing, Online resource, www.igrs.sas.ac.uk; website accessed 4/6/12.

⁴ See also her novels *Cantique des plaines* (1993), and *Ligne de failles* (2006), for example.

⁵ Jones notes how Philip Dine 'maintains that French perceptions of the Algerian War are structured by the Second World War at all levels' (p. 211), and is critical of authors using the Algerian war as a mere backdrop for reliving the Second World War (pp. 211-12). She also refers to Lynn Higgins on the dangers of 'distortion and renewed repression' created by reductive comparisons (p. 212).

⁶ Todorov writes: 'Aujourd'hui même, la mémoire de la Seconde Guerre mondiale est vivante en Europe, entretenue par d'innombrables commémorations, publications et émissions de radio ou de télévision; mais la répétition rituelle du "il ne faut pas oublier" n'a aucune incidence visible sur les processus de purification ethnique, de tortures et d'exécutions massives qui se produisent pendant le même temps, à l'intérieur même de l'Europe' (p. 61). See also Augé 1998, pp. 120-22; and Stora on the particularities of the Algerian war as the 'wound' that has not healed, and the collective amnesia in France regarding this war (Stora 2011).

⁷ Nancy Huston comments in *Pour une littérature-monde* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), pp. 151-60: 'J'aime que dans la littérature il n'y ait aucune limite; que le seul défi soit d'inventer une nouvelle vérité, sachant d'avance que les vérités possibles sont innombrables' (pp. 152-53).

⁸ See Diana Holmes: 'To write is a transitive verb: Nancy Huston and the ethics of the novel', *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 14, 1 (2010), 85-92.

⁹ See Pierre Nora's *Les Lieux de mémoire*, 1984-1992.

¹⁰ *For They Know Not What They Do* (1991), pp. 272-73, cited in Jenny Edkins (2003), p. 1.

¹¹ See Maria Cizmiciu (2011) on the connections between trauma and music. Huston herself is an accomplished musician.

¹² Cf. *EA*, 45 – getting rid of old papers; leaving behind her paternal name, for example.

¹³ Games and play are noted for playing a key role in child development, and in promoting the psychological health of the adult. See, for example, Erik Erikson's *Childhood and Society* (London: Vintage, 1995).

¹⁴ The novel ends tragically: the events of the Algerian war escalate. András's friend and contact in the FLN, Rachid, is murdered on the night of 17 October 1961; Emil dies falling from a train as his father tries to extract information about his mother's love affair from him. Saffie disappears upon hearing of her son's death and we learn nothing more of her fate.

¹⁵ Hutton comments on how Saffie 'projects a former generation's guilt onto her innocent son', p. 168.

¹⁶ He is also his mother's 'angel' (*EA* 40).

¹⁷ See Hutton's reading of the circumstances surrounding Emil's death, for example. She argues that Raphaël is unable to see beyond himself, and posits that the death of Emil at the end is largely his father's fault, and that he has taken on a symbolic, SS-like role in 'killing the next generation', p. 171.

¹⁸ The following composers are mentioned: Gluck, Bach, Jolivet, Debussy, Rimsky-Korsakov, Tchaikovsky, Strauss, Schubert, Offenbach.

¹⁹ He argues that music plays a key role: 'La musique [...] promène le narrateur et le lecteur le long d'un voyage dans le passé, à l'intérieur de leur moi, vers la compréhension. Dans ces récits, l'expression indicible que permet et produit la musique crée un réseau d'associations qui fonctionnent simultanément sur une gamme temporelle et spatiale. Elle donne son cours à l'histoire, entraînant le lecteur vers le dénouement' (p. 63).

²⁰ In a bid to convince his mother that Saffie is not evil incarnate, he argues the case for the flute as a symbol of Franco-German unity.

²¹ In this respect she is imitating her mother's post-traumatic muteness (*EA* 125).

²² See Guy Rickards' biographical entry on the BBC website following his death in 2012. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/music/artists/6c3f5aaf-bd58-49ff-8160-26af9d777f54> [accessed 28 January 2013].

²³ In *Musica Viva*. Bayerischer Rundfunk (Munich), 1959, in Miguel Couffon (1996): 118.

²⁴ See the Fifth movement, details available via <http://jmomusique.skynetblogs.be/archive/2011/06/17/mahler-pantheiste-3.html> [accessed 28 January 2013]. I am grateful to the anonymous reader for pointing out this further intertextual connection.

²⁵ See also, in a similar vein: 'Coup de tête ou non de sa part à lui, motifs inavouables ou non de sa part à elle, les fils de leurs destins sont irrévocablement noués: même s'ils ne le savent pas encore, la jeune Allemande et son mari français attendent un enfant. Un nouvel être est en train de se fabriquer, qui sera le croisement génétique de ces deux êtres si disparates... Il n'y a rien à faire: les décisions qu'ils ont prises, les gestes qu'ils ont accomplis auront des conséquences' (*EA* 46).

²⁶ There are other references to inescapable cycles of cause and effect: 'Ne pourrions-nous laisser les choses en l'état? Le temps ne pourrait-il s'arrêter là, et l'histoire s'interrompre? Faut-il vraiment poursuivre avec l'enchaînement d'autres faits, toujours d'autres faits?' (*EA* 214).

²⁷ This is the scene in which the two men in Saffie's life, András and Raphaël, meet by chance many years later in the brasserie in the Gare du Nord where the story began.

²⁸ 'C'est ici, dit-il, que l'ange pose un doigt sur les lèvres du bébé, juste avant la naissance – *Chut!* – et l'enfant oublie tout. Tout ce qu'il a appris là-bas, avant, en paradis. Comme ça, il vient au monde innocent...' (*EA* 128).

²⁹ Art historian Jill Bennett argues that the process of writing about trauma entails a 'writing out of...'. Authors are not 'speaking of' but 'speaking out of' a particular experience or memory (2000, p. 87, in Hirsch and Kacandes, p. 20). This description offers a more concrete embodied dimension to the process that often goes beyond or defies words.